

## Reframing Resistance in the English Classroom

*Student resistance, rather than something to avoid, is something to understand and even encourage, as the experiences of two teacher educators and several preservice secondary teachers describe. They conclude with specific suggestions for classroom practice.*

During an observation of a novice teacher in a high school English classroom, I (Amy Vetter) was reminded that all students are capable of resistance. After attempting to engage students in what she considered to be a thought-provoking anticipation guide and discussion-starter for *Fallen Angels* by Walter Dean Myers, several students rolled their eyes or shrugged and put their head down on top of the blank assignment. After asking one of those students why she did not engage in the discussion about controversial issues related to war, she stated that she did not care about any of the topics because she was not allowed to be part of the military based on her sexuality. Since that conversation, the teacher added an “I do not care” section to the anticipation guide. This new option opened opportunities for students in the following years to voice an opinion that might not have been heard otherwise and helped the teacher to better understand why students might resist a particular topic.

In my own classroom, resistant students make me initially question what I know and practice as a teacher educator. After reflective conversations with colleagues, however, these critical incidents involving resistant students became less about self-doubt and blame, and more about figuring out ways to provide opportunities for all students to become engaged participants.

It is difficult, however, to view student resistance as a learning opportunity during the first years of teaching. After meeting with a group of former English education students and current first-year teachers for a research project focused on

how to better prepare high school English teachers, I noticed that dilemmas of resistance were a frequent and common narrative. This common theme continued to occur during group interviews (three hours, tri-annually for two years), in individual interviews (one hour, bi-annually), and during classroom observations (bi-annually for two years). To make sense of student resistance, as a group we decided to write about a critical incident that illustrated significant moments of opposition (Angelides; Tripp) and challenged us to reflect about repositioning resistance in ways that fostered engaged reading and writing practices in the classroom. By critical incidents we mean the everyday events that occur in classrooms. As Panayiotis Angelides suggested, these events become critical based on the “justification, the significance, and the meaning given to them” (431). Each first-year teacher (all white, middle-class females) refined her understanding of student resistance as she drafted and revised her critical incidents over a period of five months.

Before drafting those stories, we examined literature and found that student opposition is one of the most frustrating and defeating situations a novice teacher can face (Benson; Brookfield; Holt). One of the first ways English teachers can begin to deal with these dilemmas is by understanding the reasons why students revolt. This is not an easy task since research has found many different reasons for student opposition (Brookfield). Studies show that students resist because the nature of teaching and learning in the classroom contradicts the beliefs and mental models that students bring with them

to the classroom (i.e., role of teacher and students and the purpose of learning; Brookfield). When lessons are irrelevant, students are likely to oppose assignments as a way to reclaim expertise and ownership (Benson; Bryant and Bates). Often, students do this out of boredom with assignments that do not challenge their capabilities (Holt).

Students also resist because they have low self-esteem about their abilities to read and write or academic performance in general (Brookfield). This is often related to a fear of failing, humiliation, and/or disapproval within a system that focuses on grades and high-stakes exams. Students might pretend that they do not comprehend the material or they may become overly enthusiastic, which prevents the student from being receptive, responsive, and/or a risk-taker (Holt). Educators recommend creating an environment that encourages cooperation and fosters the understanding that mistakes are part of the learning process (Bartram and Walton). Teachers can do this by encouraging students to self-correct and view their academic performance in terms of personal progress (Martin).

Students also feel pressure to succeed outside of school and sometimes drop out of high school due to family responsibilities. Thirty-two percent of dropouts said that they left high school to get a job to earn money for their families, 25% left to become parents, and 22% dropped out to take care of a relative (Bridgeland, Diulio, and Morison iii). Educators recommend personalizing curriculum and creating safe, supportive communities that provide opportunities to build relationships with peers and adults that are conducive to learning and success. Students also tend to rebel to gain social status from their peers. Specifically, Frank Pignatelli found that resistance can be a “critical moment, a challenge taken up by some students, to see if it is possible to think and be different from what one is expected to be” (55).

Resistance and struggle, however, can indicate a transformative learning experience. For example, many students involved in English literature courses resist the discomfort and uncertainty that challenge them to transform their typical thinking and practice (Friedman). If resistance indicates transformation, teachers are left wondering if they should change instruction or trust that the discomfort will soon lead to learning (Bryant and

Bates). This literature helped us critically examine our stories of resistance, which we discuss below.

### Katie Shepherd-Allred: Repositioning Fear of Failure

As a college student, when I imagined what teaching would be like, words such as *influence*, *growth*, and *discovery* came to mind. These words now represent what I like to call the “rainbow and butterflies” feeling of teaching. Once I actually began my teaching career, I quickly found that to achieve any of these ideals I would have to overcome the most prevalent word in my teaching world: *resistance*. Teaching young people who have struggled throughout their entire experience with reading and writing has left me with an overwhelming feeling of challenge. I take for granted the skills that students struggle with on a daily basis. The fear of failure in and out of school has left my students feeling like they have limited access to society. Their response to this injustice is to get angry, shut down, or find distractions to make it to the bell.

I do not think that there is some magic wand to wave over students to get them to work. In fact, as their teacher, I have struggled daily to not resist (e.g., ignore or dismiss to the hallway) those who choose to be resistant. It is difficult to repeatedly reach out to youth who put up a fight every step of the way. I have learned in time, however, that the young people who resist learning the most are the ones who desperately want to learn. For example, Jake consistently disrupted classroom conversations about literature to gain social status with his peers. If he got up from his desk to throw something away, he tapped and talked to everyone on his path, redirecting the class away from an academic focus. Jake succeeded every time at creatively using language to make his classmates laugh, but he did not have the confidence in his ability to use academic language to make sense of literature. To deal with this resistance, I learned to prompt and encourage

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success in a task and/or to validate his opinion. For example, when Jake suggested that he did not want to read the traditional canon, I asked him for his personal reading suggestions. When he and the class decided that they wanted to read *The Original Gangster*, a book about Tookie Williams, we dived in despite my concern that it detoured from the schoolwide curriculum. From that moment on, Jake and several other resistant students were engaged in classroom discussions and reader-response activities. I discovered that by taking up his interests and alleviating his boredom, Jake was engaged and feared less about making mistakes.

Resistant students are fighting against the perpetual feeling of failure that they face in school, and persistent patience from teachers is key (Hendley; Holt). I realized this after Jake whispered to me, “Please don’t give up on me, Mrs. S. I need you to not give up on me.” By repositioning Jake as a capable leader rather than a disruption, I was better able to dip my shoulder and take the hit that he needed me to take day after day. From then on, I asked students what and how they wanted to learn and I integrated those suggestions into my classroom as much as possible. This resulted in lessons that involved text message polls as an anticipation guide and social networking as character development. As a result, students resisted less because they experienced success in the classroom. My goal, however, is not to eliminate resistance altogether. Instead, I hope to reduce unproductive resistance and welcome productive resistance that improves learning and instruction.

### Katie Roquemore: Repositioning Insecurity and Diffidence

I expect to meet resistance to literature and academic writing in my classroom every day. Most days I welcome it. I want students to question what we are doing, be independent thinkers, and challenge me when they perceive unfairness. This is positive resistance—resistance that I was expecting based on my undergraduate studies. I quickly discovered, as a first-year teacher, myriad types of resistance.

Students resisted my literacy lessons for several reasons. Sometimes they were tired, not adequately prepared for the day, or doubtful of their own abilities. In all of these cases the resistance

appeared to be indolence and disengagement. This has been the greatest challenge for me as a first-year teacher. How do I know why a student is unmotivated or when a student does not have the literacy skills required to complete the assignment? It would be easy to assume that when students do not complete an assignment it is because they are lazy, but that oversimplifies students and teaching. How do you convince students who have not passed the state writing test, have never received positive feedback on writing, or who do not acknowledge their writer identity that they can write and have something valuable to say?

In my experience, building relationships with novice and/or struggling writers was particularly important and often enabled them to excel. For example, I had a student (Matt) who from the first day of class said, “I’m not a writer,” and he refused to write anything. When I asked for a paragraph, Matt would write two sentences. In this situation, my primary objective with Matt was to foster his writing fluency, so I simply asked him to write a little more. From our class discussions and informal conversations, I knew Matt had creative ideas to share and that he lacked confidence in his ability to write them on paper. As Stephen Brookfield suggested, students often resist because they have low self-esteem about their abilities to read and write or school performance in general. To deal with this,



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I held high expectations by not accepting anything that did not reflect Matt's full capabilities as a writer. I also took Holt's advice about building bonds with students to address resistance and went out of my way to make connections with Matt's interest in football. Despite my disinterest in the sport, I checked scores and kept track of the main players so that I could relate to Matt and build trust. This trust helped me when I pushed him to engage in more challenging work each time (Applebee). By the end of the semester Matt surpassed my writing expectations by composing full-page responses that reflected his voice and creativity. Rather than framing Matt as a "lazy" student and giving up on him, I had to recognize that his resistance was more complicated; it was my job as a teacher to develop a trusting relationship and help him learn how to situate himself as a fluent and confident author.

### **Amanda Rorrer: Repositioning Anger**

My experiences with resistance in my first year of teaching English II have been complex. One unexpected form of resistance was the anger that students bring to the classroom. As a novice teacher, I expected to focus on teaching literature rather than developing strategies to deal with daily emotional and behavioral outbursts. For example, Greg was repeating English II for the fifth time and resisted reading and writing through explicit bouts of anger (i.e., storming out of the classroom). My goal in working with Greg was to increase his reading and writing while reducing his angry outbursts that frequently disrupted class. Pignatelli helped me understand that Greg's resistance was not about me but more about a performance to gain social status at the expense of academic success. Because Greg was social, and eager to talk, he came to my classroom before and after school. From these conversations, I began to understand that his anger and resistance stemmed from a history of strife in and out of school. Some days, his visit was to do work; other days, his visits were a search for a safe environment. I would find him waiting in the hall when I arrived, and he would tell me there was too much "drama out there" and asked to "just chill" until the bell rang. Several times throughout the semester, he would come into the room huffing and puffing, throwing his book bag down, and try-

ing to head back out the door. I stopped him from going back out into the hall, requesting that he "let it go." He would calm himself for that moment and I would breathe a sigh of relief. Once he was calm, I suggested that he write about these issues in his daybook (a tool I use to provide students a safe place to practice writing and build fluency; Brannon et al.) after sharing with him some examples of my own. He took up this suggestion and filled his daybook with entries about everyday dilemmas.

Since then, I integrated open-ended writing prompts at the beginning of class that enabled Greg to engage in this practice during class as well. Greg expressed to me his like of "all the writing prompts and sentences we did" and asked his other teachers if he could continue using his daybook. Although he did not explicitly state this, I believe that he was attracted to these assignments because they asked him to make sense of himself and the world around him, something he was struggling to figure out on a daily basis.

Overall, I learned that resistance is rarely about students not wanting to read or write; it is about the complex histories that they bring with them into the classroom. I had to realize that Greg was not just an angry student. He needed opportunities to figure out the complex world he lived in and writing was the way to do that. I had to take the time to talk to Greg and find a strategy that both situated him as a successful writer and calmed his angry outbursts. As a result, when I redirected Greg's outbursts in class, he quickly conceded. Building a trusting relationship with him through informal conversations and providing opportunities for him to read and write in ways that were relevant to his life were key to motivating him (Benson).

### **Heather Beane: Repositioning the Overwhelmed**

As a first-year teacher I expected resistance. I had one student (Jamal), however, who showed resistance that I never expected. He qualified for accommodations (i.e., extra time upon request and modified assignments), but he never asked for them. When I modified his assignments and he noticed, he would ask to do exactly what everyone else was doing. The first twelve weeks of our

semester Jamal worked hard to improve his writing. I could always count on him to attempt every assignment; Jamal was the one student that I knew would be in class on time and prepared to work. Suddenly one day he decided not to work. After that day, he came to class but never participated. He listened but would not respond to our reading. He would not even complete simple worksheets as alternate assignments. Jamal did so little work that one of his classmates began turning in work with Jamal's name on it. I spoke with his other teachers, the principal, and assistant principal, and I even tried three different home numbers that were disconnected, but I didn't learn anything about the change in Jamal's behavior.

After three weeks of encouraging him (both in class and individually), pulling him to work in separate settings and persuading him to work with different groups of students, Jamal finally talked about his resistance during a follow-up individualized education plan (IEP) meeting. He was the middle of eleven children; each day after school he had to babysit the five younger and help the five older

siblings with chores. His dad had just gotten out of jail and his grandfather had a heart attack. Jamal resisted because he could not handle everything outside of school—his seven-and-a-half-hour school day was his only time to *not* work. We listened to his situation and talked with him about his future. He wanted to be a veterinarian and did not know

how he would go to college. Jamal's reasons for resistance had nothing to do with his capabilities or self-esteem but related more to how responsibilities outside of school interfered with school priorities (Alliance).

His academic performance turned around after his problems were on the table. Jamal sat with his Exceptional Children (EC) teacher and me, and we talked through his home issues, his responsibilities, and his lack of understanding why he had to do so much at such a young age. We talked about everything from his love for animals to his future goals and what he would have to do to get there.

He began working again, attended Saturday school sessions, passed his third six weeks, and moved up to eleventh grade. Jamal's resistance was his form of screaming for help. I had not expected a home situation to be so complex, and I had not expected a student in that situation to just stop, but he did. One day he was working and the next he decided he was never again lifting a pencil. As scholars suggested, understanding Jamal's life and how it impacted his school world played a large part in how I worked with his resistance (Alliance; Holt).

Resistance comes in all shapes and sizes. Sometimes, though, resistance is not about who is right or wrong. Sometimes it is about needing help and not knowing how to ask for it. Jamal taught me to reposition the way I understood classroom performance. I recognized that often students are faced with the choice between responsibilities at home and responsibilities as a student. One thing teachers can do is create a plan of action and meet several times throughout the year to modify the plan and celebrate accomplishments.

### Jeanie Reynolds: Mirrors of Resistance

As the instructor of The Teaching of Writing, a required course for English education students, I taught Katie S. and Amanda during their junior year. My story of resistance focuses on strategies that I used to reposition their opposition to specific teaching strategies. They came to the class with the desired goal and vision of becoming a particular kind of high school English teacher. Over the course of the semester, I encouraged them to consider the complexities involved in teaching writing—process work, writing workshop, responding to writing, providing space for novice writers to own their work, take risks, and figure out what it means to be a writer. Students often resist the ideologies and practices of the class because it challenges them to transform their thinking and practice about traditional writing instruction (e.g., the five-paragraph essay) (Friedman).

For instance, Katie was challenged to face her fear of failure as she tutored a struggling writer in a ninth-grade ELA classroom. In a midterm reflection, she wrote that she often felt "confused" and "frustrated" in her attempts to put into practice the

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theories that we were discussing. Specifically, her student did not do the writing she was supposed to do, making it difficult to engage in peer revision and editing. This sense of frustration became evident in our face-to-face conversations as Katie S. admitted that she felt like a “failure” as a teacher. As a result, she lacked confidence and feared the next teaching experience as we (teachers) often do when we have to face a difficult student or class.

To help Katie deal with this common issue, we examined her vision of the ideal teacher as infallible through written reflection and discussions. As suggested by Holt, our students are often afraid of failing because they are accustomed to an answer-driven approach. After describing past teachers, she revised her concept of teacher to be *someone who must make mistakes in order to learn*. She then reevaluated her approach with the student. Rather than relying on homework that would not be done, Katie first wrote with the student and then developed mini-lessons based on the writing they created at that moment. As a result, Katie became more confident in her ability as an impromptu problem-solver.

Similarly, this course challenged Amanda to shift from a focus on “getting a good grade” to a focus on learning. As a way to underscore how deeply many students are affected by grades, I give a “pop quiz” on the readings one day in class. In general, students do not do well—not because they did not read, but more often because pop quizzes are not always the best means to assess understanding of complex texts. Amanda was one of the last students to turn in her quiz and one of the first to openly question me about its validity. She made it clear that while this method of assessment might be appropriate in secondary classrooms, it was *not* acceptable in the context of the university. This example of resistance helped me make the point that teachers need to carefully consider the types of assessments they give students. Our perspectives collided, however, when she continuously asked for clarification regarding various assignments. Consistently she asked me for “how to” information—which I was reluctant to give, as the assignments are designed to promote student ownership.

Many teachers will encounter this dilemma. I asked myself, *Do I provide a structured and defined checklist or do I push her to take ownership of the as-*

*signments?* To deal with her resistance, I explicitly discussed and modeled the researched reasons why it was important to challenge herself and her students to go beyond traditional, structured models of writing. After working on a multigenre research project in class, she stated, “It gives students the opportunity to move beyond the expository writing that we are so accustomed to and so bored with. . . . I am truly out of my comfort zone. I began to realize how ‘robotic’ I have unknowingly allowed my writing to become.”

Amanda and Katie S. taught me that sometimes resistance indicates learning and transformation (Friedman). As their instructor, I had to become comfortable with this discomfort and learn how to push back while also providing support. I did this by engaging in dialogue and validation about how mistakes were a necessary part of the learning process and by explicitly stating the purposes of challenging assignments.

## Guidelines for Addressing Student Resistance

By critically reflecting on instances of student resistance, all of us reframed resistance as an opportunity to learn more about our instruction and student needs. As a result, we repositioned our students from lazy and disruptive to readers, writers who are valuable classroom participants. From these critical incidents, we learned several guidelines to follow when encountering resistance in the classroom.

### 1. *Determine why the student is resisting.*

As Heather and Katie S. learned, one of the best ways to understand students is by asking them questions about their resistance. Teachers can do this in informal conversation, they can gather information from an anonymous exit or admit slip, or they can talk to former teachers and parents/guardians (Brookfield). For example, after asking Jake what would motivate him to engage in reading practices, he provided Katie S. with a specific text (Tookie Williams). After taking up that suggestion, she was able to reposition his resistance and maintain the patience and persistence that she needed to engage all the struggling readers and writers in the class (Benson; Bryant and Bates).

## 2. Talk to students about their responsibilities outside of school.

By opening opportunities for Jamal to talk about his situation, Heather and Jamal were able to develop a plan for success based on his needs, such as extended time and tutoring during lunch. The Alliance for Excellent Education agrees that teachers need to consider students' familial and financial obligations when creating a plan for success and warns educators about the importance of consistently sticking with and/or modifying the plan so the student can continue to prosper. To do this, educators can focus on three key elements: specific needs of the student, intervention strategies, and monitoring dates that hold all parties accountable and allow for modification.

## 3. Help students understand that making mistakes is part of the learning process.


All four teachers realized that they needed to consistently position their students as successes to battle the storyline of failure that they brought with them to class. They did this by modifying curricula, building trusting relationships, and holding high expectations for students. Specifically, Robert A. Sullo suggests that teachers build a culture of success rather than an environment of fear by being mindful of the language they use. Messages of fear communicate to students that teachers expect them to do poorly, which causes them to self-preserve by resisting (Martin; Sullo). For example, rather than saying, "You are in danger of failing," teachers could say, "I won't give up on you." Teachers can also develop guidelines in their classroom that permit students to make mistakes for the sake of learning and open dialogue about getting past the fear of failure. Finally, teachers can integrate discussion of this idea during literacy lessons in traditional literature, such as *Death of a Salesman* by Arthur Miller or *The Good Earth* by Pearl S. Buck. A useful contemporary resource is *Writerly Wisdom of the Ages* (<http://www.advicetowriters.com/>), a blog in which published

writers are quoted about writing. John Reed, a communication expert, is quoted in one post on 3000messages: "Make mistakes. Make a lot of them. And make them often. It's the only way to get your thoughts on paper, and you'll enjoy the writing process more."

## 4. Try several different strategies.

Teachers must remember that it takes time to determine the causes of resistance and figure out ways to deal with them (Brookfield). Most likely, teachers will need to try several different strategies before they find one that works. When Katie R. realized that she had to develop a trusting relationship with Matt before he would engage in writing practices, she realized that this could not be done in a few days. It took several individual conversations, researching extracurricular interests, and sharing her personal stories and writing to make connections with him (Benson; Bryant and Bates; Holt). It was not until the end of the semester that Matt was writing full pages along with the rest of the class. Remembering to be patient and persistent in the face of resistance will pay off in the end.

## 5. Engage in dialogue with colleagues about everyday moments of resistance.

Teachers can engage in useful conversations about student resistance informally at their school and can also take advantage of social networks, such as The English Companion Ning created by Jim Burke. Such conversations can validate teachers' concerns and experiences and help them think through solutions to persistent problems. As Geraldine Van de Kleut and Connie White suggested, such discussions can put "resistance into perspective and normalize it." As a result, teachers are more likely to "give students room in which to resist" and, as we have suggested, reframe resistant students as active and important participants of the classroom (455). 

### Note

This article is dedicated to Amanda Rorrer, a fellow teacher, coach, director, teacher-researcher, and coauthor of this article, who passed away recently. Throughout this project, she was a constant source of insightful reflection about the learning lives of her rural students. Without her passion, this article would be missing a unique and significant perspective.

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## READWRITETHINK CONNECTION

Lisa Storm Fink, RWT

With so many other distractions available, it's all too easy for teens to turn on the television or log on to a social networking site rather than pick up something good to read. This is especially true if they think of reading as a school-related chore, rather than an activity done for pleasure. Motivating teens to read can also be complicated by the many other demands on their busy schedules. Luckily, there are many exciting and popular books for teens and plenty of innovative ways to turn teen attention to the written page as described in the ReadWriteThink.org tip "Motivating Teen Readers." <http://www.readwritethink.org/parent-afterschool-resources/tips-howtos/motivating-teen-readers-30110.html>